

Freedom of the Press

As the civil war between the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and opposition groups raged on, Syria remained one of the deadliest places in the world for journalists in 2013. While the government's loss of control in large parts of the country has resulted in the emergence of new media outlets and a de facto reduction in censorship, the rise in the influence of extremist groups during the year affected the ability of the press to report freely. This led to a slight deterioration of Syria's overall media environment.

Although Article 38 of the constitution provides for freedoms of speech and of the press, these rights are severely restricted in practice. The 1963 state of emergency law, in place until 2011, empowered the authorities to arrest journalists under ill-defined charges of threatening national security, which in effect nullified the constitution's protections. The 2001 Press Law allows for broad state control over all print media and forbids reporting on topics that are deemed sensitive by the government, such as issues of national security or national unity; it also forbids the publication of inaccurate information. Individuals found guilty of violating the Press Law face one to three years in prison and fines ranging from 500,000 to 1 million Syrian pounds (\$4,700 to \$9,500). The law also stipulates that the prime minister grants licenses to journalists, which can be revoked for reasons concerning the public interest. Under Articles 9 and 10, the Ministry of Information must approve all foreign publications. The ministry also has the power to ban these publications if they are found to challenge national sovereignty and security or offend public morality.

A new media law issued in 2011 prohibits a "monopoly on the media," guarantees the "right to access information about public affairs," and bans "the arrest, questioning, or searching of journalists." However, it bars the media from publishing content that affects "national unity and national security" or incites sectarian strife or "hate crimes." The law also forbids the publication of any information about the armed forces. It holds editors in chief, journalists, and spokespeople accountable for violations and prescribes fines of up to 1 million Syrian pounds. Article 3 states that the law "upholds freedom of expression guaranteed in the Syrian constitution" and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but Article 4 says the media must "respect this freedom of expression" by "practicing it with awareness and responsibility." There is no clear definition of this phrase, leaving room for authorities to use the law to crack down on journalists and reporters. Consequently, despite the lifting of the 1963 state of emergency law, there has been little change in the treatment of journalists in practice. The government continued to arrest reporters under the vague charge of threatening national security in 2013.

Parallel legal systems were occasionally used to prosecute journalists in 2013 in areas of the country where the government had lost effective control and could not enforce its laws and regulations. Several journalists in the northern city of Aleppo were arrested and brought before self-proclaimed Islamic courts, according to Reporters Without Borders. These courts frequently imposed self-serving edicts or adopted strict interpretations of Sharia (Islamic law) that limited freedom of expression. For example, in July, an Islamic court ordered that media activist Abdullah Maraai be arrested after he published an article in a weekly newspaper that criticized a local rebel commander.

A National Council of Information was established under the new media law to regulate the information sector. Among other duties, it will set up conditions for licenses, issue them to private media outlets, and specify rules on funding. There was little evidence that the council had begun enforcing such rules in 2013, but it did set advertising limits that will further strain economic support for independent outlets. The Ministry

of Information and the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance censor domestic and foreign news, and have banned all Kurdish-language publications.

The worsening conflict has transformed the media landscape in the country. Syrian authorities continued to forcibly restrict coverage of the unrest during 2013, and state-run television stations misreported the events of the uprising. False statements and propaganda are common on state-run outlets, whose journalists routinely refer to the opposition as “terrorists” or “radicals.” Visas for the foreign press are still restricted, and when they are issued, journalists are required to be escorted by state representatives who determine what they can cover. Opposition-oriented newspapers founded during the conflict, such as *Suriyatna*, *Oxygen*, *Hurriyat*, and *Enab Baladi*, continue to operate, though they tend to circulate either underground or mostly online. Citizen journalists have been critical in providing foreign outlets with video recordings of protests and atrocities, but the authenticity of these recordings is difficult to verify, and they have routinely been labeled “fake” by the regime.

Although the authorities unblocked access to the social-media sites Facebook and Twitter in February 2011, they sustained their crackdown on citizen journalists’ use of social media and the internet to disseminate information about regime abuses. The so-called Syrian Electronic Army (SEA), which emerged in 2011, continued to hack opposition websites, block them, or flood them with progovernment messages in 2013—with the tacit approval of the regime. It has also been involved in hacking into the Twitter accounts and websites of prominent foreign media outlets and human rights organizations, as well as harassing bloggers and online activists. The government uses surveillance equipment to intercept communications, block text messages, and track mobile telephones. Recently it has acquired technology to track satellite phones, and by extension, the journalists who use them. The SEA uses spyware to infiltrate journalists’ personal computers and get access to passwords and information on their sources, and to disseminate false information. Beyond harassment, the regime has tortured activists, bloggers, and citizen journalists to obtain the passwords to their social-media accounts.

The rise in the influence of extremist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra, which controlled territory in parts of the country, severely affected the ability of journalists to report freely in 2013. Fearing reprisals from these groups, journalists reporting from the affected areas have begun to self-censor and avoid crossing “red lines.” Both the regime and rival groups of armed rebels try to restrict or control information by attacking journalists and media organizations. In December alone, ISIS fighters stormed the offices of at least three news agencies, including [Shada al-Huriya TV](#), an opposition station; the Aleppo-based Hanano News Network; and Fresh FM radio, which broadcasts from near Idlib.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 28 journalists were killed in Syria in 2013, making the country by far the deadliest place in the world to practice journalism. Those targeted included foreign, state, and citizen journalists. In January, Belgian journalist Yves Debay was killed by sniper fire in Aleppo while covering clashes between the Syrian military and opposition forces. In May, a reporter for the progovernment television channel Al-Ikhbariya, Yara Abbas, was killed by sniper fire in the city of Al-Qusayr. In August, citizen journalist Muhammed Hassan al-Musalama was killed in the town of Daraa while filming clashes there. Abductions have also been a serious problem. ISIS fighters abducted several members of the news media in 2013, including five employees from Shada al-Huriya TV, one from Hanano News, and six from Fresh FM. Foreign journalists have increasingly become the targets of kidnappings by both government and opposition forces, including four French journalists who remained captive at year’s end. Approximately 30 journalists, about half of them foreign, had been kidnapped or gone missing during the conflict as of November 2013.

The government and allied businessmen own most newspaper publishing houses and heavily control the media. Although the government opened up space for private print media in 2001, the owners of most

private outlets—including *Al-Watan*, *Al-Iqtisad*, and *Al-Khabar*—have close ties to the regime. As a result, genuinely independent media are virtually nonexistent. However, a number of weekly or biweekly opposition publications have sprung up in rebel-controlled areas, such as *Al-Ghirbal*, *Ain al-Madina*, and *Dawdaa*. It is estimated that dozens of publications currently operate outside the purview of the regime's censorship apparatus, but some do face threats from radical Islamist factions. For example, in December 2013, copies of the magazines *Tlena al-Huriya* and *Al-Ghirbal* were burned by ISIS in the northern province of Raqqah.

Television and radio broadcasting is, in general, controlled by the state. The private Shams TV tried to extend its programming beyond entertainment by covering news in 2012, but its journalists were targeted throughout the year. Approximately 26 percent of Syrians accessed the internet in 2013, and social-media websites and communication tools such as Skype are increasingly used to transmit news. On May 8, the internet was shut down in the country for about 20 hours, and the government was suspected of responsibility; other cuts to service occur on a more localized level or because of damage to infrastructure from extensive shelling. Opposition groups have begun to use satellite devices as a means to access the internet and telephone service, a method which is protected against regime-enforced blackouts.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

89

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

29

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

38

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

22